

*Federal Agencies Release Columbia River Fish and Wildlife Documents
Issue Call for Regional Debate*

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
12/17/99

PORTLAND, Ore. – Federal agencies called for a regional dialogue on Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead recovery policies today, while releasing two major documents re-affirming the poor health of the fish and the tough choices facing the region for recovering them.

The agencies released two major documents concerning at-risk salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River Basin: a study of options for improving conditions for salmon and steelhead in the lower Snake River and a Basin-wide recovery analysis revealing serious extinction risks for Upper Columbia fish. A third document, a Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act Report, is part of the first study.

The lower Snake River study is a draft environmental impact statement by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on improving conditions for salmon and steelhead in the lower Snake River. It studies four alternatives for configuring and operating the lower Snake River dams to benefit fish: status quo operations, increased barging of young salmon downstream, improvements at dams to increase survival of young fish migrating in-river, and breaching the earthen portions of the dams to restore natural river conditions. The study suggests no preferred alternative at this time.

“There is no simple answer to this complex problem,” said Brig. Gen. Carl Strock, commander of the Corps' Northwestern Division. “I know that many would like our decision now, one way or another. But the fact is that the science doesn't point clearly to any one solution, while the biological, economic and social implications are huge. We want the benefit of additional regional dialogue and scientific information before we arrive at a preferred alternative.”

The Basin-wide salmon and steelhead recovery report, entitled “Conservation of Columbia Basin Fish,” contains sweeping biological analyses of at-risk species and potential actions for recovering them. New analyses in the report show that fish populations in upper Columbia rivers are facing extinction risks equal to or greater than similar species in the Snake River. Analyses of extinction risks for Snake River fish were released last month.

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The report is sometimes referred to as the “All-H Paper,” because its scope includes the so-called four Hs affecting salmon survival: hatchery operations, harvest policies, hydro operations, and habitat conditions. Federal officials said the report reveals strong measures will be needed to reverse the decline of fish populations throughout the Basin. It concludes a range of actions within each phase of the salmon life cycle is needed to recover the fish, and it calls for a regional dialogue on which options should be pursued.

“Salmon stocks in the Snake River and above the Hanford Reach are both in very bad shape,” said Will Stelle, regional administrator of the National Marine Fisheries Service, “There is no silver bullet, no quick fix. Saving these fish will demand a comprehensive effort throughout the Columbia River Basin.”

“The scientists all agree these fish are in dire straits, and strong action is needed now,” added Ann Badgely, regional director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, which has responsibility for resident fish, wildlife, and plant species. “It is urgent that we make these tough choices quickly.”

As part of the Draft EIS package, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is releasing a draft Coordination Act report with a preliminary recommendation that breaching the four lower Snake River dams would provide the greatest benefit for fish and wildlife. Like all Coordination Act reports, this report, by law, reviews the Draft EIS alternatives only in terms of their biological benefits to native fish and wildlife and does not consider economic or human effects. Coordination Act Reports are advisory only and are based on a review of existing studies. No new studies were done for this report. The Corps is not required to follow its recommendations.

“This is a biological report, not a policy statement. It is just one piece of a much larger puzzle,” Badgely said. “The Fish and Wildlife Service is continuing to work with the other federal agencies and the people of the Northwest to find the best solution to the complex challenges in the Columbia River Basin.”

Judi Johansen, BPA Administrator, said, “Any decision on salmon must take into account the full range of impacts on people and the environment of the Columbia Basin. The All H Paper is the first attempt to pull together all the pieces of the puzzle.”

The Federal agencies indicated they would pursue more analyses of potential economic effects of a plan that covers the Columbia River Basin. Currently available analysis does not cover the scope of actions across the salmon life cycle or the breadth of endangered stocks across the Columbia River Basin. Developing such information would provide a better understanding of social and economic implications prior to any final decisions, officials said.

Agency officials issued a call to regional and local decision-makers to respond to the latest science and options. A decision on operation and configuration of the whole Columbia River Power System is due by May 2000.

“Now is the time for people who care about these issues to engage,” said Stelle. “We need to hear what the people want to do about this problem.”

The agencies will hold a round of public meetings throughout the region for people to review and comment on the documents, as well as any final decisions. Meetings will begin in February, and are currently planned for Seattle, Portland, Spokane, Boise, Missoula, Pasco, Lewiston, Astoria, Juneau, and Kalispell. Other locations may be added. For more information, visit <http://www.bpa.gov/Power/PL/FederalCaucus/fcspl.shtml>

Over the same time period, the agencies will conduct government-to-government consultation with the Columbia River tribes. The agencies will also provide the documents to the Columbia River Basin Forum. This group could provide a venue for federal agencies, tribes, and state governments to come together to discuss recovery policies in the region.

The nine federal agencies – know collectively as the Federal Caucus – are the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Bonneville Power Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service.

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